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The Washi

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Beyond "Catching Up"

The House Select Committee on Astronautics and Space Exploration attempts in its final report to assess "the relative position of the Soviet space accomplishment with that of the United States." Because of the often ignored military potentials of space mastery, it rightly calls this a "key question." The Committee's conclusion that the Soviet Union is ahead seems amply warranted, and Moscow may reap further important political and psychological advantages, as well as hard military gains, from this pre-eminence.

But the Select Committee has found it much harder to appraise the extent and nature of the gap and has only hinted at means of closing it. Most important, it has ignored altogether the basic question of how American parity or superiority in space would, if achieved, affect the prospects for peace.

The estimate of several Committee witnesses that the Soviet "over-all" lead is 12 to 18 months and that of another witness that it would take five years to close this gap with a maximum American effort can only be guesswork. Fifteen months after Sputnik I, the United States has yet to match this achievement in payload and height of orbit. None of this country's satellites has even approached the performance of Sputniks II and III,

and the Russians have meanwhile beaten us to and beyond the vicinity of the moon. If the gap is mainly a matter of rocket thrust, it might be closed quickly by launching Atlases in tandem or by coupling Atlas and a smaller rocket. If such measures are not feasible, catching up could take years.

The Committee's recommendation for long-term, sustained funding of space projects is sensible, particularly since basic research costs are relatively low and the potential rewards so great. The Committee strikes closer to home in noting the basic inseparability of civilian and military space technology, but it stops short of pointing to the persistent lack of unified direction of the American program. T. Keith Glennan, Director of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, has indeed said recently that there is no program. NASA's responsibilities for fashioning one have already been compromised in the unabated hassle with the military, while the Pentagon is still operating its own space program on a catch-as-catch-can basis, as the propaganda-oriented "talking Atlas" shot demonstrated. It is just possible that the real "gap" between the American and Soviet programs is in organization, and if so, all our scientific skill and money may not suffice to close it.

The greatest danger in the American lag is not treated by the Committee. This is the danger that in our necessary preoccupation with greater thrusts and similar outward signs of success, we shall fail to develop and refine an underlying philosophy for the American adventure into space. It is not enough to declare vague peaceful purposes. There are explosive questions just across the technological threshold crying for imaginative solutions—solutions that can be applied to the actual maintenance of peace. One is the early prospect of reconnaissance satellites. Under joint American-Soviet auspices, such instruments might greatly lessen tensions; approached competitively, they could become serious new provocations.

This is but one illustration of the basic problem, which is not merely to match or exceed Russian rocket thrust or to get first to Venus or Mars. These things and more we must do. But the real challenge is to make the conquest of space an enterprise of peace and cooperation at the same time that we war it was said, "Only the Stars are Neutral. Let's keep them that way."